

Navigating Council Meetings

Association of Washington Cities

Elected Officials Essentials


February 18, 2026

Presented by

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 Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Navigating Council Meetings

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Jurassic Parliament

Association of Washington Cities
Elected Officials Essentials
Wednesday, February 18, 2026


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 Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Our topics

- I. Introduction
- II. How authority works at a meeting
- III. Meeting discussion, Point of Order, Appeal
- IV. Motions and Amendments
- V. Conclusion

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 Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

I. Introduction

3

 Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Why are we here?

To equip you to navigate your council meetings effectively.


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 Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

After taking this training you will be able to:

- 1. Use your authority as a councilmember correctly.
- 2. Make motions and amendments.
- 3. Respond to difficult people or situations.
- 4. State your responsibilities.
- 5. Assert your rights when necessary.

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 Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Disclaimer

The material contained in this presentation is based upon the principles and practices of parliamentary procedure. I am not an attorney and nothing in this presentation constitutes legal advice.

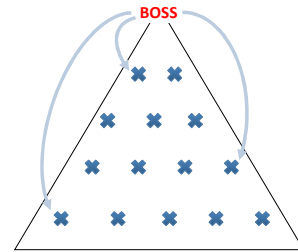
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II. How authority works at a meeting

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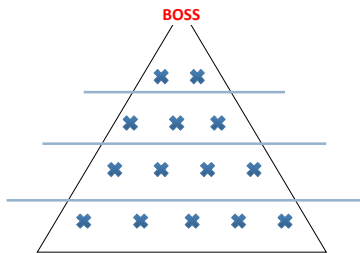
Accountability Hierarchy



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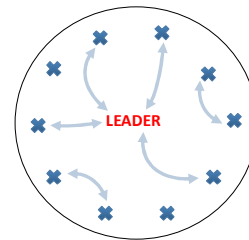
Accountability Hierarchy



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Voluntary Association



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Key Point

Each member has an equal right to speak and to try to persuade others to accept their view.

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Key Point

During meetings, the chair controls the process so the group can make the decisions.

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Fundamental guideline

During meetings,
the chair is the servant of the group,
and the group is the final authority.

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You have both types of structure

- The council forms a voluntary association.
- The mayor or city manager and staff form an accountability hierarchy.

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It's the council's meeting

- The decision of the majority of the members, voting at a properly called meeting, is the decision of the council as a whole.
- The minority must accept it, and make it their own.

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Don't try to second-guess

- Once a decision has been made, it's critical that you move on.
- Don't bring it up again, don't bad-mouth it outside the meeting, don't try to stir up the public against the decision or your colleagues.

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- To do so erodes public trust and is frustrating for your colleagues.

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Democracy is the worst system of government in all the world, with the exception of those others that have been tried from time to time.

Winston Churchill

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You must prepare for your meetings!

- The meeting packet is a heavy load.
- Nevertheless, you must read it.
- Don't embarrass yourself and the staff by asking questions at the meeting that were covered in the packet.

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III. Meeting discussion, Point of Order, and Appeal

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Principle of Equality

All members have equal rights, privileges and obligations.

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Key Point

Discussion in council and committee meetings is NOT A CONVERSATION. It is DEBATE and has its own rules.

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Fundamental guideline

- **No one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.**

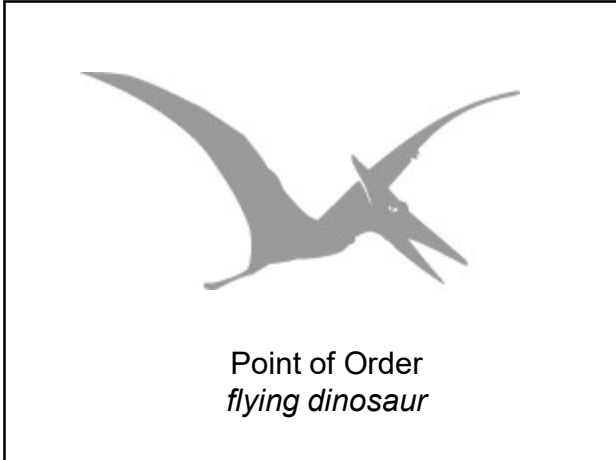
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- Note that this guideline pertains to discussion on the substantive issues.
- The chair will speak more than others on procedural matters, because they have the role of facilitating the discussion during the meeting.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Point of Order

flying dinosaur

- When ANOTHER MEMBER breaks one of the rules, a member may make a POINT OF ORDER.
- Chair rules on the point.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Point of Order

- A motion claiming that a procedural mistake has been made.
- According to Robert, can be made only by a member.
- We recommend that key staff be authorized also.
- Public may not raise a Point of Order.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Process Point of Order

1. Member: *Point of Order!*
2. Chair: *State your point.*
3. Member: *That comment breaks our rules of decorum.*
4. Chair: *The point is well taken. Members may not use this term.*

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Point of Order

- You can make this at any time, except during voting.
- Do not have to be recognized.
- May interrupt a speaker if necessary.
- Must be timely – made at the time of the offense.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

The chair must issue a ruling

- It is the chair's responsibility to say, "The point is well taken," or "The point is not well taken."
- Be alert as to whether the member who says "Point of Order" is actually using the motion correctly.
- The ruling goes into the minutes, as a precedent for the future. Use the passive voice! "A Point of Order was made that the word malarkey is insulting..."

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When should members make a Point of Order?

- Make a Point of Order if a rule has been broken.
- DO NOT make a Point of Order to bring something to the chair's attention, or because you think someone has made a factual mistake, or because you disagree with what they said.
- Speak about that when it is your turn to discuss.

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Chair doesn't have to say "Point of Order"

- The chair has the duty of maintaining order and decorum, so doesn't need to say "Point of Order."
- Just needs to take appropriate action.

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Chair subject to same rules

- If the chair breaks one of the rules, a member may raise a Point of Order.
- The chair rules on his or her own behavior, which seems odd, but is the way the system works.

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This is how you assert your rights

- If the chair doesn't recognize you to speak, or in some other way denies you your rights, you may make a Point of Order.
- If the chair rules against you, you may appeal to the entire council.

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No further discussion

- Once the chair has ruled on a Point of Order, the only allowable form of discussion is to appeal the ruling.

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Appeal

The most important motion in all of Robert's Rules –
and the least known!

MCM p. 62-63

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Chair's rulings can be appealed

- The CHAIR enforces order and decorum.
- The GROUP is the final authority.
- Any two members can appeal a ruling of the chair (one member appeals and one seconds).
- EXCEPTION: If the ruling is a matter on which there cannot be two reasonable interpretations, the ruling cannot be appealed.

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Further points

- Point of Order and Appeal are processed immediately. No other business can take place until they are dealt with.
- Points of Order and Appeals do not count against a member's turn to speak in debate.

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Don't get into arguments!

- If you are a member, you may not argue with the chair.
- If you are the chair, don't argue with a difficult member.
- Simply state your ruling, and then say
Does the member wish to appeal this ruling?

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Point of Order and Appeal are the heart of democracy



In our view, the motions Point of Order and Appeal are the heart of our democracy. They provide the mechanism to stop a dictatorial chair who's acting like a "boss." They are essential for every local

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Fundamental guideline

Courtesy and respect towards everyone are required.

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These remarks are inappropriate

1. Personal remarks about other members (except for conflict of interest)
2. Discourteous remarks – insulting language, attacks
3. Inflammatory language
4. Criticizing past actions of the group (unless subject is under discussion, or member is about to propose to amend or rescind the action at the end of their speech)
5. Remarks that are not germane (relevant) to the discussion

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Personal remarks

The measure, not the member, is the subject of debate...The moment the chair hears such words as "fraud," "liar," or "lie" used about a member in debate, he must act immediately and decisively to correct the matter and prevent its repetition.

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 12th edition, Section 43:21

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Who decides?

- If any question arises whether a remark is appropriate or not, or a comment is germane, the chair rules, subject to appeal.
- The chair may also turn immediately to the group to ask the members to decide.
- Ultimately it is the **GROUP'S CALL**.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Important note

- These are rules for councilmembers when meeting.
- These rules **DO NOT APPLY** to the public when they are giving public comment.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

IV. Motions and Amendments

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Main Motion


A motion is "a formal proposal by a member, in a meeting, that the assembly take certain action."

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 12th edition, 5:1

MCM pp. 43-45

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Main Motion
Tyrannosaurus rex

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Main Motion

We recommend this sequence:

- Staff presents proposal in writing and answers any questions. Each councilmember may ask one or two questions, then the next member has a turn.
- Motion is moved and seconded.
- Members discuss motion and may amend it.
- Members vote on motion.

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Characteristics of Main Motion

- It should be in writing if at all possible.
- It should be **clear** and unambiguous. Don't say, "I move what he just said," "so moved," or "let's do it!"
- It should be phrased in the grammatical **positive**.
- It must comply with the **bylaws** and the **procedural** law of the land.
- You can have only **one main motion** at a time.

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Fundamental guideline

One thing at a time.

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How do you introduce a Main Motion?

Three little words:

I move that...

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Member must be clear

- The member has the responsibility of formulating the motion.
- Don't mix up your ideas about the subject with the motion itself. Save those for debate. Your rules state this too.

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State the exact motion clearly

*I move that residents be authorized to build
cattios in their private yards.*

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

You can request a moment to write it down

- May I have a few minutes to write this motion down?
- Chair may also request that motion be written.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Second the motion

- You “second a motion” to show that you would like to talk about it.
- No need to be recognized. Just call out “second.”
- It is OK to second a motion you disagree with, if you want to explain why it’s a bad idea.

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If no second...

- If there is no second, the chair says:
There being no second, the motion will not be considered.
- Then moves immediately to next item of business.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Eight steps to process a motion

1. **Member makes motion.**
2. Another member seconds motion.
3. **Chair states motion.**
4. Members debate and/or amend motion.
5. **Chair restates motion and calls for vote.**
6. Members vote on motion.
7. Chair states results of vote, whether motion passes or fails, and what happens next as a result of the vote.
8. Chair states next item of business.

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Main Motion
Tyrannosaurus rex

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Main Motion

I move that residents be authorized to build CATIOS in their private yards.

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General contractor

I feel that catios will allow our dear feline friends to experience the outdoors without getting hurt or endangering other wildlife. Here is an example of a sweet little catio. I urge my colleagues to vote in favor of this motion.

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Photographer

I'm in favor! My cousin has built a catio, and her little pet Fuzzy is completely at home in it, as you can see from this picture.

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Architect

I think this is a terrible idea! Catio's are intrusive and will ruin the look of our city. Here's an example I saw when I visited Dinodome last week. We don't want this kind of ugly building in beautiful Dinopolis.

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Moving to vote

- When it seems that discussion is finished, chair asks, "Is there any further discussion?" or "Are you ready to vote?" and then, if no one speaks up, takes the vote.
- Your votes must be by roll call.
- Chair must announce the result of the vote.

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Announce the result

- *The "ayes" have it, the motion passes, and residents will be authorized to build catios in their private yards, OR*
- *The "noes" have it, the motion fails, and we will not implement this proposal.*

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Tie vote fails

- If there are equal numbers in favor and against, the motion fails.
- The chair states the fact, and then moves on to the next item of business.
- An executive mayor may break a tie EXCEPT in passage of ordinances, grant or revocation of franchise or license, or any resolution for the payment of money.

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Changing your vote

- A member may change their vote up until the time the chair announces the result.
- After that time, it takes unanimous consent of the body (everyone agreeing) for the member to change their vote.
- Once the chair has moved on to the next item of business, it is too late to change a vote.

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Abstain

- Under Robert's Rules, to abstain is to do nothing.
- Abstentions are not counted.
- The chair does not call for abstentions.
- However, since you are a public body, you will count abstentions.

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Conflict of interest

- If you have a conflict of interest, you should "recuse" yourself from the vote.
- Recusal is a special form of abstention.
- Talk with your attorney before the meeting! Don't spring it during the meeting itself.

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Amendment
Dimetrodon

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Amendment *Dimetrodon*

- You amend a motion to improve it.
- The Amendment applies to the main motion.
- The Amendment must be germane (relevant).
- Anyone may move to amend, even the person who made the motion.

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Amendment

Engineer: *I move that we amend the motion by adding the words, "Provided that the plan for each catio is approved by the Design Review Board."*

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

If adopted, will read:

Residents will be authorized to build catios in their private yards, **provided that the plan for each catio is approved by the Design Review Board.**

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Four ways to amend

1. Add or insert words.
2. Strike out words.
3. Strike out words and insert words in their place.
4. Substitute (not recommended).

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Process Amendment

- The Amendment is processed using the same eight steps that we just saw for a main motion.

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The challenge is...

- We vote on amendments BEFORE we vote on the main motion, in order to make the main motion as good as possible—to PERFECT the motion.

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Amendment blocks Main Motion

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Fate of the Amendment

- People sometimes get confused, and don't realize that after voting on the amendment, the process continues.
- Once the fate of the amendment has been decided, debate continues on the main motion.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

V. Conclusion

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

What are your rights?

- You have an equal right to speak, make motions and vote along with the other members.
- You may speak without interruption.
- You have the right to courtesy and respect.
- You have the right to an efficient meeting.
- You have the right to the information you need to make decisions.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

What are your rights?

- You have the right to make a "Point of Order" when something is done incorrectly.
- If you disagree with the chair's ruling, you have the right to "Appeal" the ruling. If another member seconds the appeal, the group will decide the matter.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

What are your responsibilities?

- To come prepared to meetings
- To follow the rules of order adopted by the council.
- To obey the legitimate orders of the presiding officer.
- To participate fully in debate, expressing your true opinion.

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What are your responsibilities?

- To understand and accept the collaborative nature of council work, which demands compromise.
- To accept the majority decision of the council, and move on.
- To refrain from trying to undermine council decisions.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Rights and Responsibilities of the Member



Weldon L. Merritt, FRP, CPP, has graciously authorized Jurassic Parliament to publish this listing of the rights and responsibilities of ordinary members of an organization.

Please note that neither the list of member rights nor the list of member responsibilities is intended to be exhaustive. In addition, neither the rights nor the responsibilities are necessarily absolute in every instance. For example, the right to debate may be cut off or limited by motions for the Previous Question or to Limit Debate. And, while a member should not vote on a matter of direct personal interest, under Robert's

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Keep in touch!

- You are invited to subscribe to our monthly newsletter.
- Subscribe to the blog on our website for insight, tips and inspiration, including our advice column, "Dear Dinosaur."

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MASTERING COUNCIL MEETINGS
 A GUIDEBOOK FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Ann G. Macfarlane, PRP, CAE
 and Andrew L. Estep, CAE

Jurassic Parliament

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

After taking this training you will be able to:

1. Use your authority as a councilmember correctly.
2. Make motions and amendments.
3. Respond to difficult people or situations.
4. State your responsibilities
5. Assert your rights when necessary.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Quick Guide for City Councils

Follow this quick guide to take the pain out of your meetings, hold productive discussions, and serve your community better.

► **BASICS**
 A quorum must be present for business to be done. Usually a quorum means a majority (more than half) of the voting members in office.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

Why are we here?

To equip you to navigate your council meetings effectively.

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Jurassic Parliament Mastering meetings using Robert's Rules

*Kindness is within our power.
 Liking is not.*

Samuel Johnson, British author

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*Serving on a local government board
is like being in a marriage
arranged by the citizens.*

Tami Tanoue, Colorado Intergovernmental
Risk Sharing Agency

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Disclaimer: Nothing in this presentation constitutes business or legal advice.

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Point of Order and Appeal are the heart of democracy



In our view, the motions Point of Order and Appeal are the heart of our democracy. They provide the mechanism to stop a dictatorial chair who is acting like a “boss.” They are essential for every local government body, nonprofit board, and any group that functions on democratic principles. Learn how to use them to ensure that the group is the final authority.

In this discussion, whenever we say “member,” we mean a voting member of the governing body.

► What is a Point of Order?

Point of Order is a motion that requires the chair to abide by the organization’s rules or parliamentary rules, or to require another member to abide by the rules. If an error isn’t obvious, the member may have to briefly explain how the rules are being broken.

This motion is made by just one member and in most circumstances the motion must be made at the time of the rule violation. When this motion is made it immediately and temporarily stops business until the Point of Order is ruled on by the chair, who will either agree with the member and enforce the rules, or may disagree with the member. Once the chair rules that the Point of Order was “well taken” (correct) or “not well taken” (incorrect), the business that was interrupted then continues (unless the chair’s ruling is immediately appealed).

► How does a member raise a Point of Order?

The member who sees a rule violation and wants the rule enforced should call out, “Point of Order!” or stand up and say, “I rise to a Point of Order.” If necessary, you may interrupt a speaker, but don’t do this lightly!



▶ **What happens next with a Point of Order?**

The chair should say, “State your point.” The member then explains the problem. Finally, the chair gives a ruling.

- If the chair agrees with the Point of Order, the chair says, “The point is well taken” and enforces the rule.
- If the chair disagrees, the chair says, “The point is not well taken,” and moves on with the business at hand.

▶ **Can a member raise a Point of Order about the chair’s actions?**

Yes. Everyone in the meeting must follow the rules. If this happens, the chair issues a ruling on their own action.

▶ **Can a member of the public or the audience who is not a member of the body raise a Point of Order?**

No. Only a member of the body itself can raise a Point of Order.

▶ **Sample script for “Point of Order”**

Member: *Chair, I rise to a Point of Order.*

Chair: *State your point.*

Member: *My esteemed colleague has used the term “cream-faced loon” in referring to the mayor of Dinoville. Under Robert’s Rules of Order, insults are inappropriate.*

Chair: *The point is well taken, and members will refrain from using this term.*

▶ **What should members do when they disagree with a ruling by the chair?**

A member can appeal the chair’s ruling (which must be seconded). This tells the chair that two members are in disagreement with the chair’s interpretation and want the body to decide it for themselves. The motion must be made immediately. If other business intervenes, then it is too late to appeal the chair’s decision or ruling.

When the Appeal is made, it immediately and temporarily stops the pending business until a decision is reached on the Appeal. After a vote is taken on the Appeal by the members, the business that was interrupted then continues.

▶ **How is an Appeal conducted?**

A member stands and without waiting to be recognized, says: “I disagree with the ruling by the chair.” The chair must recognize an Appeal, even if worded simply as, “I don’t think that’s right - I disagree with you.” The formal wording is, “I appeal from the decision of the chair.” The chair then processes the motion, which may or may not be debatable.

Read more about how to process a Motion to Appeal, including a sample script, in this [this blog post](#), “Keep the chair in line using Appeal.”

Many thanks to Beverly Przybylski, PRP, for providing the original content of this paper. Any errors are, of course, the responsibility of Jurassic Parliament.

Point of Order and Appeal are the heart of democracy

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Rights and Responsibilities of the Member



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Debate. And, while a member should not vote on a matter of direct personal interest, under Robert's Rules no member may be compelled to abstain on such a matter. Finally, as with all matters of parliamentary procedure, any right or responsibility established by RONR or any other parliamentary authority will yield to a contrary rule in the bylaws or in any applicable procedural statute.

All citations are from *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 12th edition [RONR].

A MEMBER OF A DELIBERATIVE ASSEMBLY HAS THE RIGHT

1. to attend meetings. [1:4]
2. to make motions. [1:4]
3. to speak in debate. [1:4]
4. to vote. [1:4]
5. to abstain from voting. [45:3]
6. to be given copies of the assembly's governing documents, including bylaws, special rules of order (if any), and standing rules. [2:13]
7. to unilaterally modify or withdraw a motion the member has made before it has been stated by the chair. [4:19]
8. to speak first in debate on a motion the member has made. [3:33(1)]
9. to insist on the enforcement of the rules of order, through the raising of a *Point of Order*. [23:1]
10. to require the assembly to adhere to its agenda, program, or order of business, by a *Call for the Orders of the Day*. [18:1]



11. to require a *Division of the Assembly* if the member doubts the result of a voice vote or a show of hands. [6:17(7)]
12. to change his or her vote up to the time the results are announced (except when the vote has been taken by ballot or another method providing secrecy). [45:8]
13. to demand a ballot vote on the question of guilt and on the imposition of a penalty in a disciplinary proceeding. [61:17]
14. to not have allegations against the member's good name made except by charges brought on reasonable ground. [63:5]
15. to have due process in any disciplinary proceedings. [63:5]
16. to require separate consideration of two or more unrelated questions offered in a single motion. [27:10-11]
17. to make a *Parliamentary Inquiry* or a *Request for Information* (also called *Point of Information*). [33:1]

A MEMBER OF A DELIBERATIVE ASSEMBLY HAS THE RESPONSIBILITY

18. to become familiar with the assembly's bylaws and procedural rules. [2:13]
19. to obtain the floor before making a motion or speaking in debate. [3:30]
20. to refrain from criticizing a ruling of the chair unless the member has appealed from the ruling. [24:2]
21. to refrain from debating a matter that is not pending. [43:4]
22. to confine remarks to the merits of the pending question. [43:20]
23. to refrain from attacking or questioning the motives of other members. [43:21]
24. to address all remarks to or through the chair. [43:22]
25. to refrain from referring to members by name. [43:23]
26. to refrain from speaking adversely on a prior action not pending. [43:24]
27. to refrain from speaking against the member's own motion. [43:25]
28. to read from reports, quotations, or other documents only with permission of the assembly. [43:26]
29. to be seated during any interruption by the chair. [43:27]
30. to refrain from disturbing the assembly. [43:28]
31. to refrain from explaining the member's vote during voting. [45:7]
32. to abstain from voting on a matter of direct personal interest. [45:4]

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Quick Guide for City Councils



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Follow this quick guide to take the pain out of your meetings, hold productive discussions, and serve your community better.

► BASICS

A quorum must be present for business to be done. Usually a quorum means a majority (more than half) of the voting members in office.

The chair runs the meeting in the service of the council. He is not the “boss” but serves as a facilitator, helping the council to hold free and fair discussion and make good decisions.

Ordinarily a councilmember must make a motion before any discussion begins. If there is no second, the motion is not taken up.

If a member makes a motion to amend the main motion, it is discussed and voted on before the main motion. After amending a motion, a vote must be taken on the main motion as amended.

After discussion, the chair calls for the vote and announces the result. The motion passes when a majority of those voting vote in favor, unless state law or your rules of procedure require a higher vote. This is different from the requirement for a quorum.

If someone “calls the question,” the chair must take a vote on whether to vote now or continue discussion. It takes a 2/3 vote to cut off discussion.

➔ over



► DISCUSSION

All members have equal rights, privileges and obligations. This means that discussion is not a conversation, but follows some important rules:

- The chair recognizes speakers in turn.
- No one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.
- Interrupting is not allowed.

Councilmembers must be courteous and respectful. They may not make inappropriate remarks such as personal remarks, insulting language, or comments that are irrelevant.

If a councilmember breaks the rules, the chair may correct him, or another councilmember may raise a point of order. The chair rules as to whether the point is correct, or not. A councilmember who disagrees with a ruling of the chair may appeal it. If another member seconds the appeal, the council decides.

The minority must be provided equal opportunity to debate, even if their views are unpopular. However, the decision of the majority voting at a meeting is the decision of the council as a whole.

► PUBLIC INPUT

Public hearings and other quasi-judicial proceedings must be run according to the requirements of state law.

Public comment sessions offer an opportunity for members of the public to inform the council of their views. We recommend not entering into back-and-forth exchanges. Community forums, one-on-one discussion, feedback forms on the website, surveys etc. are better channels for an exchange of views.

Under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the public is not bound by the same rules of decorum and courtesy as the councilmembers.

The public should not engage in clapping, booing, hissing or other disruptive actions, since they intimidate speakers, may suppress free speech, and impede the work of the council.

Quick Guide for City Councils

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